

# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

### **From a Reliant Land to a Kingdom in Asia: Premodern Geographic Knowledge and the Emergence of the Geo-Body in Late Imperial Vietnam**

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#### **Abstract**

This article examines a change in how members of the educated elite in Vietnam viewed their kingdom's place in the world. It argues that, prior to the twentieth century, Vietnamese scholars saw their kingdom as being connected to, or reliant on, the empire to its north, which we now refer to as "China." In particular, Vietnamese literati believed that moral virtue from the North had spread southward over time and enabled the Southern Kingdom, as they sometimes called their land, to emerge. The flow of geomantic energy from north to south played a similar role. In 1908, however, a reformist scholar named Lương Trúc Đàm published a geography textbook, *Geography of the Southern Kingdom (Nam Quốc địa dư)*, that disconnected the Southern Kingdom from any form of reliance on the North. In this work, Đàm also sought to nurture in his readers patriotic feelings toward the Southern Kingdom. In so doing, Đàm contributed to the creation of what historian Thongchai Winichakul has referred to as a "geo-body," an identifiable and separate geographical entity for which students are taught to develop patriotic emotions.

Keywords: geography, Southeast Asia, Vietnam, geo-body, Lương Trúc Đàm

In the current age, the five continents are in contact and the six types of peoples intermingle. Competition is ever fiercer and changes are ever more numerous. Regardless, if one is a scholar, a farmer, an artisan, or a merchant, one cannot hide in one's village. This is why it is essential to lecture on the study of geography.

—Lương Trúc Đàm (1908, 1a)

In 1908, Vietnamese scholar Lương Trúc Đàm was alarmed. As a member of a new generation of reformist intellectuals, he had started to learn about the world in new ways—as a Social Darwinist competition between societies, among others<sup>1</sup>—and what he saw disturbed him. The fact that by 1908 his land, which he called the Southern Kingdom (Nam Quốc), had fallen under French colonial rule was a clear sign that it was losing this competition.<sup>2</sup> Đàm blamed the

citizens of the Southern Kingdom for the country's weakness, arguing that scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants were holding onto rotten scholarship, inferior forms of agriculture, crude craftsmanship, and failing forms of commerce, respectively. The reason for all of these failings was simple: people did not know geography. Unlike other countries around the world where people studied the geography of their own and foreign lands, the citizens of the Southern Kingdom did not even know the geography of their own land. Because of this, Đàm argued, their knowledge and views were limited, leading to all of the above failings. Đàm therefore made a solemn plea to his compatriots: they must love their country, and, in order to do so, they must know its geography.<sup>3</sup> To facilitate this process, Đàm wrote a textbook called the *Geography of the Southern Kingdom* (*Nam Quốc địa dư*, see figure 1).

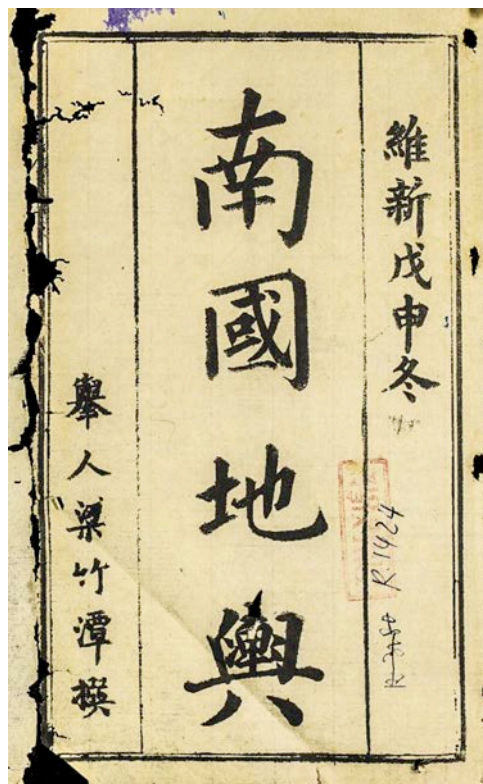


Figure 1. Cover of the *Geography of the Southern Kingdom*. Source: Lương Trúc Đàm (1908).

While Đàm criticized all levels of society for their lack of knowledge about the kingdom's geography, he was nonetheless aware that, prior to the twentieth century, there were specialists who knew a great deal about this topic, although it had not been taught in the

academies where young people studied to pass the civil service exams. However, as Đàm explained, national citizens in the early twentieth century were starting to pay attention to universal education and, in the process, were realizing that knowledge of geography was important.<sup>4</sup> Đàm wrote his textbook in response to this need.

The work that Đàm produced can be seen as a transitional piece of scholarship. The fact that it was written in classical Chinese points to its place in a long tradition of scholarly production, but a tradition that would soon change as Vietnamese abandoned the use of classical Chinese in favor of writing in the Romanized vernacular. In addition, Đàm's text was created at a time when the civil service examinations were still being administered, and were still the focus of education for many. While Đàm did not produce his textbook for the purpose of preparing students for the exams, it would have been accessible only to those who were far enough along that educational path to have attained the necessary degree of literacy in classical Chinese to be able to read it. In other words, while Đàm noted that national citizens were now paying attention to universal education, no universal educational system had actually been set up in the Southern Kingdom by 1908. Therefore, Đàm's text was ultimately directed toward a small, and elite group of students, with the hope that it would provide foundational information for a future national curriculum.

Although Đàm's overall project was still elitist, as had been the case with traditional education in the Southern Kingdom for centuries, the way in which information was presented in his textbook marked a radical departure in how the Southern Kingdom's territory and its place in the world were perceived and discussed. In earlier works, the territory was described in connection to forms of moral and geomantic power, and the sources of those forms of power lay outside the kingdom and were particularly prevalent in "the North," or what we today refer to as "China." Đàm severed these connections with exterior forms of power and described the Southern Kingdom as a discrete national space that stood alongside other such discrete national spaces in the world. By describing the Southern Kingdom's territory and its place in the world in this manner, Đàm's work contributed to the much larger process of transforming a premodern kingdom into the modern nation of Vietnam.

As historian Thongchai Winichakul points out in *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (1994), one way in which the concept of the nation took hold among common people in Siam in the twentieth century was through their exposure to modern maps. Simply put,

without maps on which people can literally see the geographic contours of their nation on a piece of paper, it is difficult for them to imagine it and to develop emotions toward it. Thongchai created the term “geo-body” to refer to this phenomenon. More specifically, the geo-body refers not simply to the territory of a nation, but to the fact that the shape of the territory is clearly recognizable to the citizens of the nation through their exposure to maps, and that this image “is a source of pride, loyalty, love, passion, bias, hatred, reason, unreason,” etc. (Thongchai 1994, 17).

In a recent essay entitled “Nation and Geo-Body in Early Modern Vietnam: A Preliminary Study through Sources of Geomancy,” historian Momoki Shiro surveys extant Vietnamese texts on geomancy (*phong thủy*) from before the twentieth century and argues that these texts “must have helped people... imagine a kind of ‘geo-body’” (2010, 138). This geo-body, Momoki explains, “might not be a clearly bounded surface but a network of veins and focal points” (2010, 139). Nonetheless, he contends that geomantic descriptions were probably more successful than premodern maps in enabling people to imagine a geo-body, as premodern Vietnamese maps “contain few toponyms other than names of administrative units above villages, and were more obscure about natural topography like mountains and rivers” (2010, 139).

While I am not certain that one could imagine a “kind of geo-body” with any more ease from a geomantic description than a premodern map, the fact that geomantic descriptions tied the kingdom’s geomantic power to a source that lay beyond the kingdom’s borders denotes a way of viewing space that is different from the concept of the geo-body. As Thongchai argued, one distinctive feature of the geo-body is that it stands alone and is not reliant for its existence on anything beyond its borders. This places the geo-body in contrast to conceptions of space, such as those promoted by Buddhists in premodern Siam who drew maps that connected areas in what is now Thailand with the Buddha’s birthplace in today’s India (Thongchai 1994, 20–36). Premodern Vietnamese geomantic texts likewise linked the land to geomantic nodes that emanated from an area outside the kingdom. Efforts to connect certain powers in the kingdom with sources beyond its borders were not limited to the realm of geomancy; there were various ways in which the land was depicted in relation to a form of moral power that likewise was seen to have its source outside the kingdom.

When all of these ways of viewing the Vietnamese kingdom's place in the world are taken into account, it becomes clear that premodern Vietnamese ways of viewing the world were dramatically different from that of envisioning, and feeling attached to, a geo-body. This is what makes Lương Trúc Đàm's early twentieth-century textbook so important, as it draws our attention to a radical transformation in how educated Vietnamese viewed their land. To put it simply, one could argue that Đàm began the process of creating the geo-body of Vietnam, as he was the first to present Vietnam as a delineated geographic space with no power connecting it to another land. As we will see, he also made an effort to cultivate in his readers emotions for that space. This article seeks to illuminate this point by examining first premodern Vietnamese literati's view of their land as reliant on sources of power from beyond its borders, both moral and geomantic, and then by looking at how Đàm transformed that view.

While the ultimate purpose of this article is to demonstrate that an intellectual transformation of how national space was perceived took place in Vietnam in the early twentieth century that closely resembled what Thongchai documented for Siam, I will do this by examining conceptions of national space rather than how national space was actually plotted on maps, as Thongchai did. In other words, this article will examine ideas rather than cartographic practices. Further, while I realize that Vietnamese literati held diverse ideas regarding space, there is nonetheless a clearly discernable tradition of viewing the kingdom as connected to sources of power from beyond the borders of the kingdom. This view was first developed by medieval scholars in the Red River Delta region and was then perpetuated by the Nguyễn dynasty based at Huế in the nineteenth century.

### **Connecting the Kingdom to a Source of Political Power**

In 968 Đinh Bộ Lĩnh became the ruler of the Red River Delta. Two years later, the Song dynasty dispatched an envoy who granted Lĩnh the position of commandery prince (*quận vương*), continuing a long-running practice of granting titles to powerful individuals in the region. In the twelfth century this title was elevated to the level of "king" (*quốc vương*), and this kingdom maintained its position as a tributary state of the Middle Kingdom (Trung Quốc) until the late nineteenth century.

The emergence of this new type of polity in the region required new forms of legitimacy, a task that a small number of literati set about fulfilling. In particular, Vietnamese scholars



While Liên stated that he found works such as the *Arrayed Tales* to contain much that was absurd or unaccountable, he nonetheless relied heavily on this book to grant the earliest known polity in the Red River Delta an even more ancient pedigree.<sup>7</sup> Chinese sources such as the *Annotated Classic of Waterways (Shuijing zhu)* had recorded that, prior to the incorporation of the Red River Delta into the Chinese empire, a domain had existed in this region ruled over by some kings (Li Daoyuan [6th century C.E.] 2007, 37/7a–b). Liên included in his history a story from the *Arrayed Tales* that connected the first of these kings with the mythical Chinese sage-ruler Shennong, the “divine agriculturalist.”

Given that the *Arrayed Tales* is the only source for this story about distant antiquity, some modern scholars have proposed that this tale was created in the fifteenth century for a specific political purpose. Historian Keith Taylor, for instance, has argued that it was an effort to create an imperial tradition that would “predate the founding of the imperial tradition in China” (1983, 304). There is a problem with this position, however; there was no single founding date for the imperial tradition in China. Han Dynasty historian Sima Qian began his first-century B.C.E. work, the *Historical Records (Shiji)*, with the Yellow Emperor, a mythical figure who supposedly came after Shennong, but the eighth-century historian Sima Zhen “corrected” this earlier work by arguing that the imperial tradition should start from the time of Fu Xi, a mythical figure who was said to predate Shennong (c.f. Schaab-Hanke 2010, 265–290). Therefore, we cannot say that Liên’s tracing the Vietnamese imperial tradition back to Shennong was an effort to predate the Chinese tradition, or to establish equivalence with it, as others have argued, as neither of those positions accorded with the ideas about the Chinese imperial tradition that existed during his time. All we can say for sure is that Ngô Sĩ Liên included in his history a story that connected the imperial tradition in the Red River Delta to a powerful source that was external to the region.

The story that Liên created stated that Shennong’s descendent Diming had a son by the name of Diyi. Diming then went on a tour of the south where he met a woman who produced for him a second son. Diming wanted to pass the throne on to this youngster. However, out of deference to the rightful successor, his older brother, the younger son refused to accept this offer. Diming thereupon ordered Diyi to assume the emperor’s throne and rule over the north while the second son was invested as King Kinh Dương (Kinh Dương Vương) and ordered to rule over his own kingdom in the south.<sup>8</sup>

King Kinh Dương had a son known as Lord Lạc Long (Lạc Long Quân). At this point the *Arrayed Tales* and the *Complete Book* diverge. The *Arrayed Tales* states that Lord Lạc Long ran off with a woman named Âu Cơ, who was the wife of Dilai, the successor of Diyi.<sup>9</sup> The *Complete Book*, on the other hand, states that Lord Lạc Long married Âu Cơ, the daughter of Dilai.<sup>10</sup> These two texts come into agreement again in claiming that one of Lord Lạc Long and Âu Cơ's sons became the first of a line of rulers known as the Hùng kings (Hùng Vương), who reportedly ruled for eighteen generations over a realm called Văn Lang. While premodern Vietnamese literati considered the realm of the Hùng kings to be an early version of their own kingdom, the *Arrayed Tales* and the *Complete Book* state that it covered a much larger area than where the Vietnamese lived in the fifteenth century when this information was recorded. Those texts reported that Văn Lang “pressed against the Southern Sea to the east, and came up against [Sichuan] to the west. To the north it reached Lake Dongting, and to the south it touched the [area of what is today central Vietnam].”<sup>11</sup>

Although much of the above information constitutes a narrative about the past rather than a discussion of space, it nonetheless is important for understanding the ideas held by premodern Vietnamese about their kingdom's place in the world. What we can see is that by the fifteenth century, if not earlier, Vietnamese literati could not conceive of a world in which relations between kingdoms took any form other than that of a suzerain-vassal relationship. According to the account in the *Arrayed Tales* and the *Complete Book*, the ruler of the earliest kingdom in the region, King Kinh Dương, was linked by descent to the imperial (“Chinese”) ruling family. Further, his kingdom did not stand as separate and equal, but instead was established through a process of investiture. A Chinese emperor, Diming, conferred a title on his second son to serve in the south, while the elder son inherited the main kingdom from his father.

The fundamental nature of this relationship is more evident in another story about the early history of the kingdom in the *Arrayed Tales* and *Complete Book*, a story about the Việt Thường (Ch. Yuechang) clan. Chinese sources, such as the *History of the Later Han*, record that members of this clan arrived unannounced at the court of King Cheng of the Zhou in the eleventh century B.C.E. from somewhere far to the south and presented him with a white pheasant. When questioned about why they had come, the Việt Thường reportedly responded that “elders in our kingdom said that there have been no severe winds in the skies nor rough

waves on the seas for three years already, and that this means that there is a sage in the Middle Kingdom. We thereupon came to present ourselves at his court.”<sup>12</sup>

There is no evidence that these people came from the area of the Red River Delta. However, Vietnamese literati nonetheless incorporated this story into the history they invented about antiquity, undoubtedly because it accorded with their own view of the world, which was divided into “North” and “South,” with the North being superior on multiple levels. It was larger and more powerful politically, but it was also viewed by premodern Vietnamese literati as morally superior. This was a fact that the Việt Thường had supposedly recognized in antiquity, and it remained the norm in the fifteenth century, when this story was incorporated into the *Arrayed Tales* and the *Complete Book*.<sup>13</sup>

This acceptance of inequality on multiple levels colored premodern Vietnamese literati’s perception of their land as unequal to the empire to their north. Further, while they believed that the land transformed and expanded over time, they also believed that it only did so as moral and cultural practices from the North gradually took hold in the region. They felt that the presence of human morality (*đức*) was necessary for a kingdom to come into existence and to bring order to the land. Initially, according to premodern Vietnamese literati, the region lacked the proper morals for such transformations to fully take place. In examining the past, for instance, Liên concluded that the marriage between Lord Lạc Long and Âu Cơ that produced the first Hùng king had been improper. He stated:

I have found in the *Outer Annals of the Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government* [*Zizhi tongjian waiji*] that Dilai was Diyi’s son. Based on this record, King Kinh Dương was Diyi’s younger brother, and yet [these two lines] intermarried. I guess this happened because that was still a primordial age and the proper rites and music had yet to become manifest.<sup>14</sup>

While this information cannot be taken as a factual account of early Vietnamese history, the idea that in antiquity “the proper rites and music had yet to become manifest” was shared by other premodern Vietnamese literati. In the eighteenth century, for instance, a scholar by the name of Ngô Thì Sĩ commented on this period of history by noting that “after time began our kingdom was far off in the Desolate Zone [Hoang Phục], and human civility [*nhân văn*] came to it much later than in the Central States.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, according to Ngô Thì Sĩ, the region had originally been “a wild swamp of serpents, snakes, and demonic creatures.”<sup>16</sup>

The term “Desolate Zone” comes from early Chinese texts, where it was used to refer to the far reaches of the known world. That Ngô Thì Sĩ used this somewhat derogatory term to refer to the location of his kingdom in antiquity demonstrates the basis of premodern Vietnamese geographical concepts on long-held Chinese ideas that placed the Middle Kingdom at the center of the world, particularly in terms of culture and morality. Premodern Vietnamese literati did not challenge this view. Instead, they built their understanding of their kingdom’s place in the world on this concept. Their ideas differed from those of their Chinese counterparts in that Vietnamese literati saw a process of development over time in their kingdom that Chinese writers did not see or comment on. In particular, premodern Vietnamese literati believed that “the proper rites and music” did eventually become manifest, and, as they did so, the kingdom expanded. As to how they became manifest, that again came through the unequal relationship with the North, where the moral virtue that spread southward originated.

### **The Spread of Moral Virtue**

According to premodern Vietnamese literati, the southward spread of moral virtue was a long process that began gradually in distant antiquity. In the earliest times, Ngô Thì Sĩ explained, “our kingdom was still nebulous and unformed,” but later,

From the middle of the Hùng-king period onward, that is, as the universe of Yao and Shun transformed into [the world of] the Xia, Shang and Zhou, although the mountains and rivers [of our kingdom] were far away, a moral atmosphere [*phong khí*] started to seep in. Those who had formerly worn their hair in mallets gradually started to establish admiration [for the ways of the Central Kingdom], and [began to wonder] how to prevent the coveting of others’ belongings, how to prohibit robbery, and how to get fathers to pass control on to their sons and rule for generations over the domain and establish an imperial or royal enterprise like this that will last for a long time.<sup>17</sup>

This gradual southward spread of a “moral atmosphere” was later aided by the arrival in the region of figures from the North who embodied it. The first such person credited for his moral virtue in Vietnamese historical sources was an administrator by the name of Zhao Tuo (V. Triệu Đà), initially in the employ of the Qin dynasty.<sup>18</sup> Zhao, originally from an area in what is now Hebei Province, was dispatched by the Qin court to the far south to take up a post in the area of what is now Guangdong. When the Qin dynasty collapsed at the end of the third century

B.C.E., Zhao proclaimed himself the emperor of a realm called Southern Yue (Ch. Nanyue; V. Nam Việt), although he later pledged his allegiance to the Han dynasty and reportedly ceased to use the term “emperor” for himself.

At the height of his power, Zhao ruled over a domain that included the modern Chinese provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi, as well as what is now northern and part of central Vietnam. Many centuries later, when Vietnamese literati sought to compile a history of their realm, they included this information about Zhao’s kingdom of Southern Yue, as they felt that he had set a model for governance that they wished to follow, namely one based on moral virtue (*đức*). As historian Lê Văn Hưu stated in the thirteenth century,

Being adept at governing does not depend on the size of one’s land or whether one is an Efflorescent or a Barbarian. Instead, it is all determined by moral virtue. Martial Emperor Zhao was able to develop Our Việt [Ngã Việt] rule as an emperor over his kingdom, and oppose the Han.... He was the founder of the royal enterprise of Our Việt. How great was his achievement!<sup>19</sup>

By “Efflorescent” (*hoa*), Lê Văn Hưu meant the people who upheld the elite values of the Middle Kingdom (those who we would today refer to as “the Chinese”). While he argued that moral virtue was more important to governing than whether one was an Efflorescent or a Barbarian (Di), in reality the concept of moral virtue that he praised was a concept defined and promoted by Efflorescents. It was also one that scholars like Ngô Sĩ Liên believed was brought to the region by Efflorescents such as Zhao and a Han dynasty administrator named Shi Xie (V. Sĩ Nhiếp).

Although Shi’s family was originally from an area in what is now Shandong Province, by the time of his birth in 137 C.E., the Shi clan had lived in Cangwu, present-day Guangxi Province, for generations. Shi entered the Han dynasty administration through the examination system and was eventually appointed to the position of governor of Jiaozhi Commandery, which covered the area of the Red River Delta. Under Shi’s custodianship, Jiaozhi Commandery remained an oasis of tranquility, while much of the rest of the region fell into chaos with the Han dynasty’s gradual collapse. Adding to the splendor of this age, at least as imagined by Vietnamese scholar-officials centuries later, was the fact that many Chinese scholars took up residence in Jiaozhi at this time to escape the fighting farther north.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when Vietnamese scholars attempted to piece together a history of their kingdom, the period that Shi governed over Jiaozhi Commandery was the earliest time to which they could attribute the texts and practices that enabled people to develop moral virtue, Confucian teachings, and scholarly pursuits. Hence, Liên commented that

Our kingdom became well versed in the *Classic of Poetry* and *Venerated Documents*, started to practice [Confucian] rites and music, and became a domain of manifest civility starting in the time of King Shi [i.e., Shi Xie]. So how can his virtuous merit be said to have only extended during his time, for it has reached far down to later ages. Is this not magnificent?<sup>20</sup>

To Vietnamese literati in later centuries, this was indeed magnificent, for Shi's efforts furthered the transformation that had begun with the descent from Shennong and had intensified with the Hùng King's demarcation of the kingdom's borders and Zhao's model behavior. We can see this progression summarized nicely in the following comments by an anonymous nineteenth-century Vietnamese author:

In antiquity, the Việt Thường [lived in the area of] our kingdom. [Since] they chattered like birds and tattooed their bodies, their customs were crude, more or less like the people in the mountainous regions [of our domain] today. Starting when the Marshal Emperor Zhao controlled the seven commanderies, the *Classic of Poetry* [*Shijing*] and the *Venerated Documents* [*Shangshu*] were used to model the people's customs.<sup>21</sup> When the Sagely Youngster Ren was governor in Jiuzhen, rites and propriety were first used to instruct the people of the kingdom.<sup>22</sup> Thenceforth, how our kingdom began to flourish, for we finally realized the benefit that writing brings to people, the importance of rites and music with regard to customs, and the improvements that can take place under the illumined patterns [of Confucian teachings].

During the time of Commandery Governor Shi, some remnant waves of the Zhu and Si rivers gradually flowed into the Southern Seas [Nam Hải].<sup>23</sup> Now the proper sacrifices were made during times of war and stringed instruments were played even in damp, malarial villages. [The spread of the proper teachings] came to people like the sounding of an alarm or the drumming of a bell. Wherever the teachings reached, [one found] peace and Efflorescent customs [*hoa phong*]. Later, the Lý, Trần, and Lê [dynasties] all successively established schools and held examinations, thereby allowing civil rule to flourish, and so many men of talent to emerge in every generation. [Our kingdom] thereupon came to be called a domain of manifest civility [*văn hiến chi bang*]; one which enlivened the people's hearts, radiated like the Esteemed Kingdom, and of which histories talked of a "South of the Passes literary/cultural style."<sup>24</sup>

This author viewed Shi as a key figure in a long process. More specifically, he believed that Zhao had begun a process of transforming people in the region by exposing them to the teachings in such works as the *Venerated Documents* and the *Classic of Poetry* (although there is no historical evidence that he actually did so). A Chinese administrator, Ren Yan, had continued this process by teaching the local people proper ritual practices. Shi had then brought these practices to a state of maturity and saw to it that “some remnant waves of the Zhu and Si Rivers gradually flowed into the Southern Seas.” Hence, according to this nineteenth-century Vietnamese scholar, by Shi’s time, and thanks to his efforts, the Vietnamese were participating fully in the educational, ritual, cultural, and intellectual spheres of the larger Sinitic world. Eventually, Vietnamese dynastic houses, such as the Lý, Trần, and Lê, would work to institutionalize these practices. Not surprisingly, it was also at that point that something known as the celestial scripting became manifest.

### **Celestial Scripting**

It was commonly accepted in premodern East Asia that there was a direct correspondence between the earth and the heavens. As Vietnamese scholar Phạm Đình Hổ noted in the early nineteenth century, “According to astronomers, there are nine regions on earth and nine territories in the heavens. Each time that an auspicious or inauspicious portent appears in a given celestial territory, the corresponding region below will respond accordingly.”<sup>25</sup> For this theory of the correspondence between heaven and earth to be valuable to human beings, though, they first had to discern the correspondences between these two realms, which at the beginning was not self-evident.

Another early nineteenth-century Vietnamese scholar-official, Phan Huy Chú, noted this when he described what the part of the world where Vietnam was located had been like in distant antiquity.

From the time that heaven and earth [were formed] there have been mountains and rivers. Just as constellations are separate, so are territories distinct. Each kingdom has its own territory. Establishing borders and delineating areas is the foremost task in establishing a domain. We Việt formerly inhabited the distant wilds. Our ways were not up to those of the Central Region. Before the Shang and Zhou this was an area of serpents and swamps. At that time, land and rivers were

haphazardly interspersed, mountains and seas were each on their own, and border principles were therefore still unclear.<sup>26</sup>

What Chú described was a region in a state of primeval chaos. While it is true that “just as constellations are separate, so are territories distinct,” and that “each kingdom has its own boundaries,” both terrestrial and celestial, these boundaries and distinctions were not evident prior to the efforts of human beings to find them and make them manifest. From the perspective of a scholar like Chú, this was not a task that any individual could accomplish. Instead, only those who exhibited moral uprightness could fully complete such an endeavor. However, Vietnamese literati argued that in distant antiquity individuals of such moral caliber had yet to appear, as Liên’s comment above about incest indicates. They were thus incapable of fully “establishing borders and delineating territories.” Nonetheless, as people gradually cultivated their moral qualities, thanks to the spread of the Confucian teachings by people like Shi, individuals eventually emerged who possessed the moral stature necessary for this task. When they did, something known as “celestial scripting” (V. *thiên thư*, Chn., *tianshu*) became manifest.

Mentions of “celestial scripting” are relatively common in Vietnamese writings. The term also appears in Chinese texts, but not with the exact same meaning. Chinese employed this term to refer to such specific forms of writing as an emperor’s edict or a revealed text. In this latter sense, scholars have translated the term as “celestial writing,” and have argued that a practice of receiving revealed texts of celestial writing emerged during the Six Dynasties period among Daoists (Hsieh 2005). It is perhaps in this sense that this term was first used in Vietnam in the late eleventh century, but in later centuries Vietnamese literati provided it with an expanded meaning. In so doing they created a new concept, one that I refer to as “celestial scripting.”

The first recorded usage of the term “celestial writing/scripting” comes from a poem that a Vietnamese general, Lý Thường Kiệt, reportedly heard spirits intone before he engaged in battle with a Song dynasty army in the eleventh century:

The Southern Emperor occupies the mountains and rivers of the Southern Kingdom,  
This is clearly demarcated in the celestial writing/scripting.  
How can these bandits come and invade?  
Watch and see how they suffer a complete defeat.<sup>27</sup>

Since this is the first time that the term “celestial writing/scripting” appears in recorded Vietnamese history, it is not clear what exactly it meant in this context. Some versions of this

poem state that “August Heaven” (Hoàng Thiên) was responsible for demarcating the Southern Emperor’s place in the Southern Kingdom, and some scholars have accordingly argued that the poem is indicating support from heaven for the Southern Kingdom and its emperor.<sup>28</sup> While this may be true, it is not clear from this poem how heaven supposedly did this.

In later centuries, however, Vietnamese literati employed this term in a way that made its meaning more apparent. In particular, they saw it as referring to the process whereby the patterns in the heavens that correspond with the borders of a kingdom below became manifest as human beings brought order to the world and clearly demarcated terrestrial borders. This was different from the concept of celestial writing as a divined text, and I therefore refer to this phenomenon as “celestial scripting.” In particular, celestial scripting refers to the inscription of patterns in the heavens that correspond with the patterns that morally upright human beings make manifest on earth. Further, it was a process that Vietnamese literati argued about, developed, and expanded over time. For instance, for Phan Huy Chú, the early-nineteenth-century scholar-official who, as we saw, argued that in distant antiquity “land and rivers were haphazardly interspersed, mountains and seas were each on their own, and border principles were therefore still unclear,” the establishment of a dynasty by the Hùng kings began to bring order to this chaos, and this was reflected in the celestial scripting. He therefore noted that, “as for We Việt, from the time that the Hùng kings established a kingdom by demarcating boundaries and setting up a capital, the celestial scripting of the southern land’s mountains and rivers has been roughly set (*hược định*).”<sup>29</sup>

If one argues that this same concept of celestial scripting is referred to in the poem that Lý Thường Kiệt reportedly heard, then it was “clearly demarcated” by the eleventh century. However, later generations of scholars saw their kingdom taking on its rightful territorial form with corresponding celestial patterns at a later date, either sometime during the Lê dynasty (1428–1788)<sup>30</sup> or perhaps not until the Nguyễn dynasty came to power in the nineteenth century.<sup>31</sup> In other words, premodern Vietnamese scholars believed that, as the empire expanded, so too did the celestial scripting. In the early nineteenth century we therefore find Lê Quang Định, a scholar-official in the employ of the newly established Nguyễn dynasty, stating that

For the more than 1,000 years from the time of King Kinh Dương and Lord Lạc Long up to the Lý, Trần, and Lê, the celestial scripting terminated at Hoàn Sơn [~18th parallel]. Our arrayed worthies [i.e., the Nguyễn ancestors] established a

domain that covered the area of Champa, Zhenla, and the four prefectures of Qui Nhon, Hoài Ân, Quảng Nam, and Bình Thuận. [At that time,] the land was still divided at the Linh River. The people did not understand writing, and governmental institutions were numerous and disorderly. August Heaven graced us with its assistance in establishing a court. Starting from the east, it came to encompass the southern periphery. The borders were brought in order and the land was united as one. The transformative effects of the teachings [i.e., Confucian teachings] were now able to penetrate everywhere.<sup>32</sup>

Here we get to the key of what enabled the celestial scripting to manifest itself. While it is true that human beings had to first demarcate terrestrial boundaries for their correspondence in celestial patterns to appear, only morally upright human beings could succeed in doing this. What is more, these same morally upright rulers who were able to demarcate the terrestrial boundaries would then, of course, seek to transform the people within the borders of their realm by having them follow the mores of the same teachings as they did. Hence, what the celestial scripting indicated was not simply that there was a realm on earth that had clearly demarcated borders, but that this realm was also ruled over by an enlightened ruler who sought to transform his people along the same (Confucian) lines.

As such, we find comments in the Vietnamese historical record indicating that the celestial scripting went from being “roughly set” during the time of the Hùng kings to being clearly demarcated later. These comments mirror the claims that moral virtue was weak during the time of the Hùng kings but gradually took hold as northerners like Zhao and Shi brought this value southward and taught the people how to live in a way that enabled them to be morally upright.

Some may counter that there is evidence that Vietnamese literati in the nineteenth century came to see themselves as more *hoa*, or “Efflorescent,” than the “barbarian” Manchus who ruled in the North at that time, and that therefore Vietnamese literati did not always view the Middle Kingdom as the center of their cultural and moral universe. To some extent this is true, as we can see for instance that in certain cases the Nguyễn dynasty court chose to continue to dress in styles that dated from the earlier Ming dynasty, rather than follow Qing dynasty innovations. However, we can also see a major effort to learn about and apply many other aspects of Qing rule, particularly its administrative and legal structure.<sup>33</sup> In addition, Emperor Minh Mạng had a Temple of Sovereigns of Successive Generations (Lịch đại đế vương miếu) constructed in his capital in 1823 that placed ancient Northern, or “Chinese,” emperors at the center of the temple

and later Vietnamese rulers on the sides, again indicating a movement of a form of power from north to south, and from past to present. Martial temples (*võ miếu*) from that period followed a similar format, with earlier northern generals at the center and later Vietnamese generals on the sides (Kelley 2015, 1971–1974).

### **The Geomantic Tradition**

In this long process by which certain ideas and skills moved southward—thereby allowing the Vietnamese realm to transform in ways that would eventually be recognized in the celestial scripting—another individual played a critical role. This was the Tang dynasty official Gao Pian (V. Cao Biền). Gao was dispatched to the southern reaches of the Tang realm in the ninth century to put down disturbances caused by the kingdom of Nanzhao, which had emerged in the area of what is now Yunnan Province in China and had subsequently sent its armies into the Tang dynasty’s Protectorate of An Nam, the area where an autonomous Vietnamese realm would eventually emerge.

After defeating the Nanzhao armies, Gao directed his efforts at bringing order to the Tang’s protectorate. He did this by establishing a walled citadel at what is today Hanoi and by controlling and rationalizing the spiritual and geomantic powers of the region. Later, Vietnamese scholars viewed Gao’s efforts in different ways, but all felt indebted to his accomplishments.

One of Gao’s more famous projects was to order the dredging of the sea approaches to the coast. While touring in 867, Gao saw that in the waterways along the coast there were many boulders just below the surface that caused boats to capsize, thereby disrupting the transport of grain. He thereupon ordered two of his subordinates to direct their troops to open up these channels, and they were able to clear all but a couple of large boulders. In the end, though, a sudden storm arose and shattered these remaining boulders to pieces. In the fifteenth century, Ngô Sĩ Liên wrote of this event as follows:

Why was Gao Pian’s work in boring out a harbor so extraordinary? It is because his actions were in accordance with principle [*lý*], and he therefore received Heaven’s assistance. Heaven is principle. It is a common principle that the lay of the land has both rugged obstacles and smooth open spaces. It is also a common principle that people use their strength to overcome rugged obstacles. Should people be unable to overcome rugged obstacles, why would Heaven entrust its powers to them?<sup>34</sup>

Liên saw Gao's efforts to open up transportation channels in the region as being in concordance with principle, a concept that Neo-Confucian scholars employed to refer to the underlying logic of the universe. His actions were not executed based on selfish motives, but out of a desire to transform a chaotic landscape into its rightful state of order. Further, just as it took virtuous individuals to make the celestial scripting manifest, so it required someone of Gao's high moral character to accomplish this task, for the difficulty of this project required assistance from heaven, and heaven only aided virtuous individuals who acted in accordance with principle.

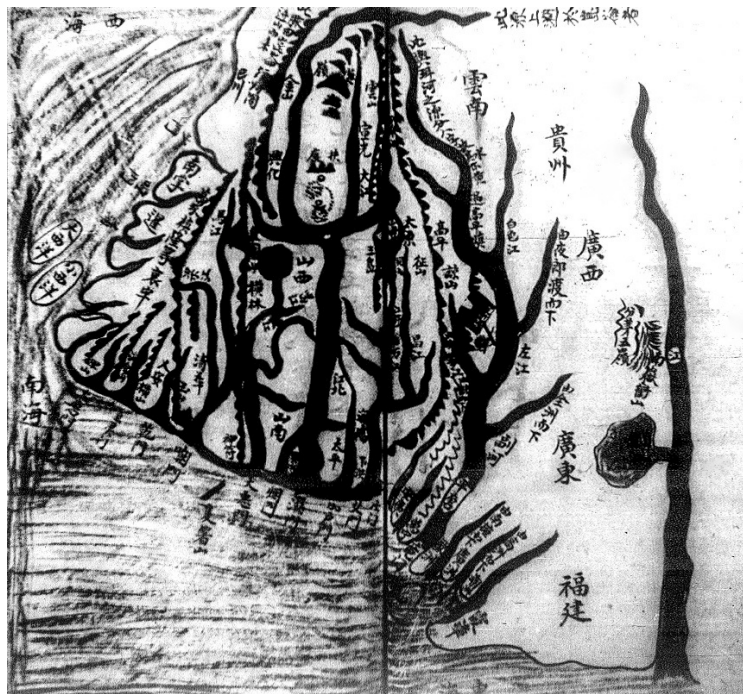


Figure 3. Geomantic arteries in Vietnam. *Source: An Nam phong thủy* (n.d.).

However, not all premodern scholars viewed Gao's activities in such roseate terms. There was another story about Gao that tied his mission more closely to the Chinese imperial project. Specifically, Gao was famous for his expertise in geomancy, and many premodern Vietnamese scholars believed that he had compiled a text while in the region that delineated its main geomantic features (see figure 3). Some versions of this story also argued that the fifteenth-century Ming dynasty general Huang Fu had referred to, and expanded on, Gao's text when he assisted the Ming in regaining direct political control over this region. In subsequent centuries,

several different geomantic texts circulated in Vietnam, all claiming to be the work of Gao and/or Huang. One such text described the circumstances in which Gao compiled his original geomantic record as follows:

During the reign of Tang Yizong [r. 860–873], the area of Jiaozhou [V. Giao Châu] was organized into commanderies and districts. The emperor recalled ancient matters when Zhao Tuo called himself emperor and resisted the Han charge. He thereupon appointed Gao Pian as protector-general of An Nam. When he was about to depart, the emperor summoned him into his leisure palace and stated, “You are quite adept at studying the principles of the terrain. I have heard that in An Nam there are many precious nodes [that produce] sons of Heaven. You must exert your utmost to suppress them. You are to elucidate each and every point about the topography for me to observe.” When Pian reached An Nam, he suppressed all of the great arteries in the famous mountains that he crossed. Tân Viên mountain, however, was too charged. Pian was unable to suppress it, and therefore, did not dare try further.<sup>35</sup>

This passage painted Gao in a rather different light. While it still described him as a very capable individual, he was no longer the selfless servant of heaven but a key agent in an imperial project. His main task was consequently not to open up channels of communication, but to suppress arteries of geomantic power that allowed potential sons of heaven to emerge in the region. He did this by erecting shrines and temples that could keep powerful spirits at bay. However, at least one such spirit proved too potent for Gao to rein in.<sup>36</sup>

By the nineteenth century, an apocryphal tale that purported to explain how Gao’s geomantic knowledge came to be known by Vietnamese emerged. According to this story, during the Ming occupation in the early fifteenth century, one of Gao’s descendants was dispatched to the region to finish the project that his ancestor had left incomplete. This man did not wish to remain long in the region, however, and passed the responsibility on to the Ming general, Huang Fu. This story relates that Huang was then captured by Lê Lợi, the Vietnamese general who led the anti-Ming resistance movement, a detail that is not historically accurate. However, according to this story, Huang was obliged to hand over Gao’s geomantic text in return for his release, thereby finally enabling Vietnamese scholars to control the powers of their land.<sup>37</sup>

These tales reveal that there was a sense among Vietnamese that their land was spiritually and geomantically charged, so much so that it required extremely talented individuals to map out

its geomantic principles and find ways to keep its geomantic powers at bay. Gao was the first individual to successfully do this.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, whoever sought to rule over the region needed this information, and premodern Vietnamese geomancy experts claimed they could not acquire it on their own because the North was viewed as the source of geomantic expertise. Therefore, to be taken seriously, Vietnamese geomantic texts had to either pose as the works of Chinese writers or be written by Vietnamese geomantic experts trained in the North.

Hence, there were texts purporting to have been written by Gao himself, such as the *An Nam Nine Dragon Classic* (*An Nam cửu long kinh*) or *Gao Pian's Posthumous Writing* (*Cao Biền di cáo*).<sup>39</sup> There were also texts attributed to later Chinese scholars who sought to follow in Gao's footsteps, such as the *Draft Record of the Land in An Nam* (*An Nam địa cáo lục*), which was attributed to a group of Chinese scholars who spent twenty-eight years in An Nam studying its terrain.<sup>40</sup> Finally, there were also texts like *Hoa Chinh's Principles of the Land* (*Hòa Chinh địa lý*), a geomantic treatise compiled by a Vietnamese scholar who spent five years at the beginning of the eighteenth century studying geomancy in Beijing from Gao's twenty-fifth-generation descendant Gao Qi.<sup>41</sup>

Why was knowledge about geomancy related to the North? Ultimately, it was part of a larger belief that all important knowledge—that is, all of the ideas and practices that made one an Efflorescent or *hoa*—originated in the North. Also, the geomantic tradition linked people who followed Efflorescent ways to their exposure to powerful geomantic arteries and nodes. Finally, it was understood that the most powerful geomantic arteries and nodes were in the Middle Kingdom itself. This can be seen clearly in the *Geomancy of An Nam* (*An Nam phong thủy*), an early-nineteenth-century geomantic text created by a Chinese geomancy expert in Vietnam, which contains a map of the main geomantic arteries in the region. This map shows one main stream of geomantic power flowing from the Himalayas into the area of what is today central China and explains that the main artery in this stream gave rise to the ancient Xia and Shang dynasties, while a subsidiary artery infused the world with such dynasties as the Zhou, Han, Tang, and Ming. Meanwhile, it depicts another powerful stream that flowed to the north and gave rise to the Qing, as well as a very small stream of geomantic power that flowed to the south into “our kingdom” (Ngã quốc).<sup>42</sup>

While one might argue that this was a “Chinese” view of the world of geomantic power, given that the author of this text was reportedly Chinese, a similar perspective is expressed in

works created by Vietnamese scholars. For instance, an introduction to a collection of maps that originally dated from the late fifteenth century describes the larger region in the following terms:

The heavens are round in shape and incline toward the northwest, giving rise to mountains, while the land is square in shape and declines towards the southeast where the sea [water] accumulates. Therefore in the center is the Middle Kingdom, and at its four corners are the Four Barbarians. The southeast puts forth the illumination of civility (*văn minh*) like the Middle Kingdom, while the northwest resonates with a vigor that is unlike the Middle Kingdom. Such are conditions [created by] principles (*lý thể*). Our land of An Nam is to the south of the Middle Kingdom and stretches to the east like a belt.<sup>43</sup>

The above quote is from a text that is concerned with what we would today label as geography (*địa lý*) rather than geomancy (*phông thủy*), and today these are seen as two distinct ways of knowing. However, in premodern texts, these two forms of knowledge were not as distinct. Geomantic texts sought to understand “the land’s (*địa*) principles (*lý*),” whereas premodern geographic texts provided information about “the territory” (*địa*). However, in doing so, as the above quote demonstrates, they were concerned with showing how “principles” (*lý*) created the “conditions” (*thể*) of the land, including the societal conditions of the people who lived on the land, such as the presence or absence of the illumination of civility (*văn minh*).

The “illumination of civility” that this text refers to is the manifestation of all the ideas and cultural practices that made one an Efflorescent. Here again we see that these ideas and cultural practices are centered in the Middle Kingdom, although, as we have seen, scholars argued that these ideas and cultural practices gradually made their way to Vietnam through the work of various individuals from the North. At the same time, the comparatively small geomantic artery that stretched down into Vietnam was also seen as contributing to the southward spread of Efflorescent ways into the land (see figure 4).

In a primer for children published in 1853, scholar Phạm Phục Trai states in poetic verse that was meant to be easily memorized that “the southern domain is one of civility [*văn hiến*]; its geomantic arteries are very special. The Yellow Kun[lun] is the ancestral [node]; from which it divides into three [arteries].” He then goes on to note that northerners have long seen the rituals of the Southern Kingdom and those of Goryeo, or Korea, as similar, and that this demonstrates that “the Việt domain is one of civility.” As for why this is the case, Trai explains that it is because of the geomantic energy that infuses their lands.<sup>44</sup>

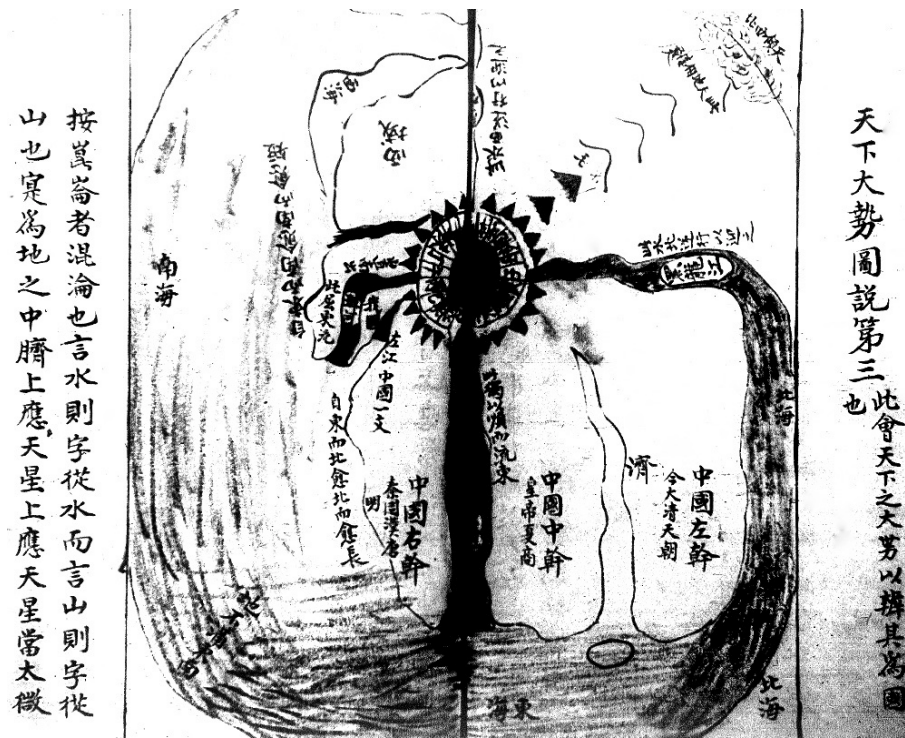


Figure 4. Geomantic map of East Asia. Source: *An Nam phong thủy* (n.d.)

While Trai argued that geomantic energy led to similarities among people, he pointed only to similarities between Vietnamese and Koreans. The comments of northerners validated the importance of these similarities. Hence, what all of this shows is the deep influence of the reality of the unequal relationship between the South and the North on the way that premodern Vietnamese scholars viewed their land's place in the world. They lived in a separate kingdom, but that kingdom could not be understood without reference to another kingdom in the North.

### Severing the Ties

Vietnamese geomantic texts thus demonstrated that geomantic power came from outside the kingdom, as did knowledge of this power. The concept of the celestial scripting argued that the patterns in the heavens came to mirror the patterns on earth when morally upright rulers brought order to the land. This concept of morality likewise originated from outside the kingdom and was believed to have been originally brought by people from there. In other words, in this premodern Vietnamese way of viewing the kingdom's place in the world, the land only made

sense through its various connections with a land and cultural world beyond the kingdom's borders. This was not a geo-body. However, in the geography textbook that Lương Trúc Đàm produced in the early twentieth century, the *Geography of the Southern Kingdom*, he sought to get his readers to view the Southern Kingdom's place in the world in new ways, and in doing so made it possible for the concept of the geo-body to emerge.

Lương Trúc Đàm was the son of Lương Văn Can, a prominent reformist scholar who in 1907 helped found, and served as director of, the Tonkin Free School (Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục) in Hanoi, a school modeled after Keio Gijuku (now Keio University) that sought to offer a “modern” curriculum. Like his father, Đàm initially followed the educational path that led to the civil service exams; he passed the provincial-level exam in 1903, earning the title of “recommended man” (*cử nhân*). However, also like his father, Đàm did not seek to become a government official, but instead tried to promote educational reform. It was for this purpose that he wrote the *Geography of the Southern Kingdom*, first published in 1907 and used as a textbook in the Tonkin Free School. That school was forced to close later that same year by the colonial authorities, and in 1908 Đàm died at the young age of twenty-nine.<sup>45</sup> However, at that time the colonial authorities were also attempting to centralize and modernize the curricula of traditional schools where the medium of instruction was classical Chinese.<sup>46</sup> In the midst of these efforts by reformist scholars and colonial authorities to transform educational content to various degrees, we can assume that Đàm's textbook continued to be read in the years after his death, as it fulfilled the need that many scholars felt at that time for a new way of thinking about themselves and the world they lived in.

Indeed, Đàm did explain the Southern Kingdom's place in the world in new ways. Here is how his textbook begins (see figure 5):

Our kingdom is located in the south of the continent of Asia [Á-Tê-Á]. To the north it presses against China's [Chi-Na] Yunnan and Guangxi [Provinces]. To the west it meets Laos [Ai Lao] and Cambodia [Cao Miên]. To the south it comes up against the China Sea. To the east it borders the China Sea and China's Guangdong [Province]. The kingdom has been established here for 4,767 years. The total area of the kingdom is 311,100 square kilometers [cơ-lư-miệt]. (Bắc Kỳ [Tonkin] is 119,200. Trung Kỳ [Annam] 135,000. Nam Kỳ [French Cochinchina] is 56,900.) Its territory is not small.<sup>47</sup>

From the use of new foreign terms in this passage—Á-Té-Á, Chi-Na, cơ-lu-miêt—we can see that the author was writing about his land in a new way after having been exposed to reformist writings influenced by Western conceptions of space. As in the geographies of Western nations at that time, there was no place in the *Geography of the Southern Kingdom* for geomantic nodes. Nor was it acceptable to see Vietnamese space as connected to some source of moral power beyond the boundaries of the kingdom. In this text, geographic space was severed from its previous source of power and meaning. Now it stood alone. The Southern Kingdom was now in “Asia,” and it was “311,100 square kilometers.”

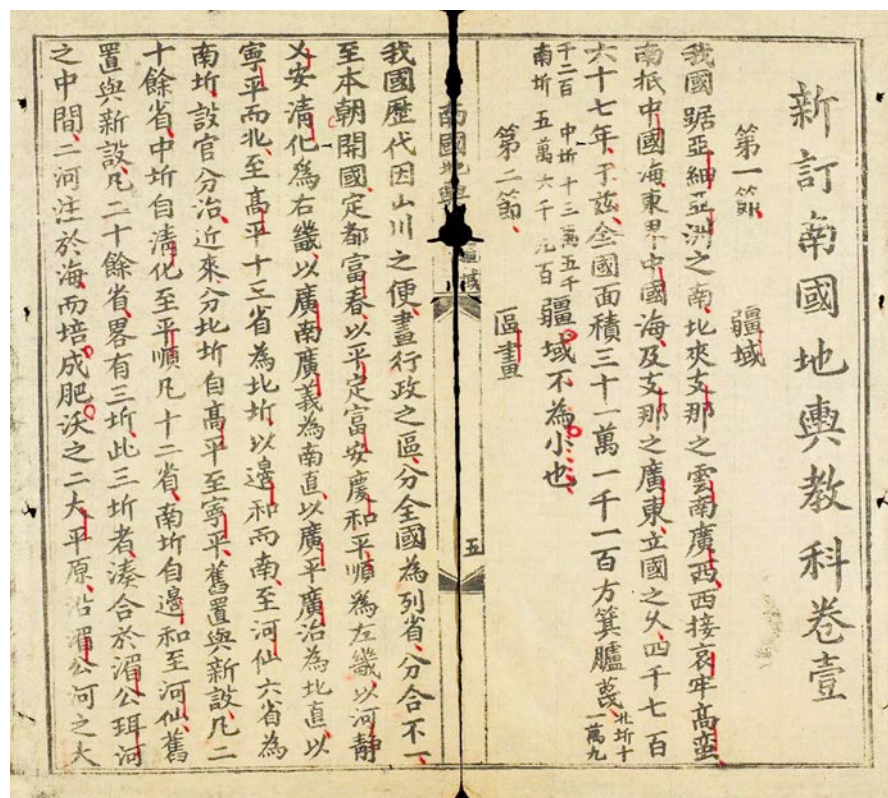


Figure 5. The first page of the *Geography of the Southern Kingdom*. Source: Lương Trúc Đàm (1908).

After describing the Southern Kingdom’s place in the world, Đàm discusses the main administrative divisions in the country. Here he recounts how in the early nineteenth century the Nguyễn dynasty had established its capital at Phú Xuân, today’s Huế, and had designated areas to the immediate south of the capital as the Left Royal Domain (Tả Kỳ) and the Southern Guard (Nam Trực), and areas to the immediate north as the Right Royal Domain (Hữu Kỳ) and the

Northern Guard (Bắc Trục). The areas of what are today northern and southern Vietnam, meanwhile, were referred to as the Northern Boundary (Bắc Kỳ) and the Southern Boundary (Nam Kỳ), respectively. Finally, Đàm notes that the specific terminology for the areas in the center of the country was eventually replaced by the term Central Boundary (Trung Kỳ).<sup>48</sup>

Having thus indicated that the country had three major administrative regions, Đàm goes on to note that the Northern Boundary is the area through which the Nhị Hà, today commonly called the Red River, flows, and that the Mi Công (Mekong) flows through the Southern Boundary. These two rivers, connected by a thin strip of land through the center, make the land in the north and south fertile. He then offers a way to visualize the geography of the kingdom, by stating that “people often liken the layout of the land of our kingdom to a bamboo pole carrying two baskets.”<sup>49</sup>

As Thongchai pointed out, the geo-body of a nation is a reference not only to a nation’s territory but also to the ability of people to visualize that territory and feel emotions for it. He further argued that the ability to visualize the nation only became possible with the use of modern mapping techniques and with the effort to teach people about the shape of the nation through universal education in which students were exposed to modern maps. Apparently, a colored map of the kingdom was printed to accompany the *Geography of the Southern Kingdom*. Đàm explained that he had wanted to produce maps for the various provinces but did not have the time; therefore, he created only a single map of the entire kingdom to supplement the text.<sup>50</sup> It is not clear which map that was or whether it is still extant; however, this act of likening the shape of the kingdom to a familiar image—a bamboo pole with a basket hanging from each end—must have facilitated the process of enabling people to visualize national space. What is more, like modern mapping techniques, this image of the territory of the kingdom would appear to have come from “the West,” as the structure of this sentence (“people often liken the layout of the land of our kingdom...”) certainly makes it seem like he is referring to how “other people,” such as the French, viewed “our kingdom.”

Đàm also made a deliberate effort to get people to feel emotions for their national space. His textbook includes a section on famous people from the entire territory of the kingdom that begins with a passage that can be seen as a modernized version of a passage from the fifteenth-century *Arrayed Tales*. That earlier text began by stating that, “although the Cinnamon Sea is in [the area of] South of the Passes, marvelous mountains and streams, potent land, outstanding

people, and miraculous affairs can all be found there.” The “Cinnamon Sea” (Quế Hải) was a reference to the coastal areas to the south of the Five Passes (Ngũ Lĩnh), which run along the northern border of what is today Guangxi and Guangdong Provinces and separate the area of “South of the Passes” (Lĩnh Nam) from the areas to the north. All of these expressions were created by Chinese authors in the past and reflect Chinese perceptions of space. What is more, the idea that this area of the Cinnamon Sea was the home to potent land and miraculous affairs was also in keeping with Chinese views of the south, with the exception that the compiler(s) of the *Arrayed Tales* wished to show that the potency that existed in the area could give rise to “outstanding people.”

Đàm opened his section on important people in a similar way, but used modern concepts. To quote, he stated that “our kingdom is located to the south of the Asian tropical belt. Its seas and rivers give birth to refinement and its mountains and peaks congeal the essence of excellence. Since the time of the *Hồng Lạc*, there have been eminent heroes and heroines in every age.”<sup>51</sup> Hence, instead of using Chinese spatial terms, Đàm employed a new, and universal concept: “the tropical belt.” The term he used for heroine, *anh thu/yingci*, was also a modern term that Chinese reformers had recently begun to use. In an effort to promote patriotism, Chinese reformist scholars in the early twentieth century wrote about not only the contributions that men had made to the nation in the past, as traditional scholars had done, but also the contributions that women had made, as writers in Europe did with their glorification of national heroines like Joan of Arc. Finally, while *Hồng Lạc*, a reference to the mythical origins of the Vietnamese world, might appear to be an old term, it was likewise a new term that emerged around the turn of the twentieth century. Both *anh thu* and *Hồng Lạc* appear on a list of neologisms that the journal *Nam Phong* sought to popularize in the late 1910s and early 1920s. *Anh thu* is defined in Vietnamese as “a famous, talented woman,” and the French equivalents of “famous woman” and “heroine” are provided. Meanwhile, an explanation of *Hồng Lạc* is provided in Vietnamese thus: “The *Hồng Bàng* clan gave birth to *Lạc Long Quân*, the founder of our county of the South.” It then says, in French, “The first Annamite [i.e., Vietnamese] dynasty. By extension: the Annamite race.”<sup>52</sup>

In other words, not only did Đàm wish to demonstrate that there had been heroes and heroines in every age, but he also implied that these people were part of a single race. He then mentions each of these famous people, making clear where they were from. We learn, for

instance, about Ngô Quyền from Đường Lâm, who defeated a Southern Han army at the Bạch Đằng River in Quảng Yên and Trần Hưng Đạo from Sơn Nam (now Nam Định, the text explains), who defeated the Tartars (the Mongols).

This pattern of indicating a famous person, what he did, and where he was from continues, and then Đàm turns to examples of famous women, beginning with the two Trưng sisters and Lady Triệu, all women well known for having led troops into battle to fight Chinese armies in the early centuries of the common era. Other women that Lương Trú Đàm mentions, however, are not as famous, or at least they are no longer famous, but they must have been known at the time. We learn, for example, about a certain Trần Thị Quyền who protected her mother and attacked a tiger in Bình Định, and a certain Lý Thị Uyên, who remained resolved and cultivated her moral character in Biên Hòa. Bình Định and Biên Hòa are both in the southern half of the country. Đàm also notes that Trần Thị Dung, a woman who assisted the Tây Sơn in the late eighteenth century, fought rebels and provided food supplies to Hà Tiên, a port town near the Cambodian border.

By the early twentieth century, there were numerous stories of famous men that one could compile together, as Đàm did in his *Geography of the Southern Kingdom*. However, most of these stories were from a more distant past, when the heartland of the country was in the North; few recounted stories of the heroic acts of men from the South. Also, the figures that Đàm chose to include from the northern half of the country were largely people who had resisted a northern army, whereas that tradition did not exist in the South. As such, Đàm was clearly trying to invent a new “national” tradition of heroes and heroines that would cover the entire territory of the kingdom and would instill in his readers emotions for a territory that they could visualize as a bamboo pole with a basket on each end.

## Conclusion

Texts such as the *Geography of the Southern Kingdom* began to create a geo-body for Vietnam. When this information was subsequently taught through a school system that sought to offer universal education, in classrooms that had modern maps hanging on their walls, the geo-body was able to come into existence. Once this happened, this new conception of the kingdom’s place in the world replaced centuries of belief in a very different world. For centuries prior to the publication of Lương Trú Đàm’s textbook, Vietnamese literati had been writing about a

southward movement of people, ideas, practices, and, most importantly, moral virtue that had taken place since time immemorial. Given that all of this had, in fact, come to Vietnam from the North, it is understandable that Vietnamese literati saw the North as greater than their own land in many respects. Therefore, rather than discussing their uniqueness or their independence, ideas that were totally alien to them, Vietnamese literati wrote about their connections to the land that mattered most to their very existence.

In the time period between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries, Vietnamese literati wrote that there were connections between their kingdom and the North that could be traced back to the time of the mythical sage-ruler Shennong. They also saw early evidence of the tributary relationship with the North in the stories of figures like King Kinh Dương and the Việt Thường clan. They honored the northern warlord Zhao Tuo for his moral virtue, a quality that enabled him to establish a kingdom in the region and declare himself emperor. They also honored the northern administrator Shi Xie for his moral virtue and for inculcating that quality in Vietnamese by introducing them to the Confucian classics. This was important for premodern Vietnamese literati, as they felt that it was moral virtue that eventually enabled their own people to rule over an autonomous kingdom, a fact later mirrored in the celestial scripting. The Tang dynasty administrator Gao Pian was also recognized for his role in teaching the Vietnamese how to control the powers in their land that were capable of producing emperors, but that by the nineteenth century were still inferior to the powers that coursed through the terrestrial arteries of the North. The premodern South was distinct, but it was also distinctly connected to the North.

Đàm's *Geography of the Southern Kingdom* constitutes an early attempt to change this worldview. He felt the need to do so because, as we saw at the beginning of this article, he believed that the Southern Kingdom needed to become stronger in order to survive in a Social Darwinist world of competition between societies. Đàm was able to think in this new way in no small part due to his exposure to ideas from and about the West that reformist scholars like his father were encouraging young Vietnamese to learn about by studying in Japan and at the Tonkin Free School. However, Đàm was also able to think in new ways because the Southern Kingdom's ties to the North had been officially severed. In 1884, when the French and the Nguyễn dynasty signed the treaty that granted France control over the entire territory of the Southern Kingdom, the seal of investiture that the Qing dynasty had granted Gia Long, the Nguyễn dynasty founder, was melted, an act that was clearly meant to signify that the Southern

Kingdom would no longer be able to rely on the North in any way (Taylor 2013, 475). Đam clearly understood what this change meant, and, through his *Geography of the Southern Kingdom*, he sought to teach the few young people who were literate in classical Chinese what they needed to know to enable the Southern Kingdom to survive and hopefully one day prosper in this new world. While that textbook was not solely responsible for what ensued, the Vietnamese view of their land's place in the world did clearly change in the direction that Lương Trúc Đàm mapped out in it.

*Liam C. Kelley is associate professor of History at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. He would like to thank the three anonymous readers of this paper for their helpful comments and express his sincere gratitude to Professor Hue-Tam Ho Tai, the editor of this special issue, for her comments and suggestions. This paper is much stronger and more insightful thanks to her input.*

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### Notes

- 1 For more on the adoption of Social Darwinist ideas by reformist scholars during this period, see Tai (1992, 20–22), Brocheux and Hémery (2009, 293–294), and Marr (1981, 92).
- 2 The term *quốc* can be translated as “kingdom,” “country,” or even “nation.” For its usage in sources prior to the twentieth century it makes sense to translate it as “kingdom,” given that it was monarchs who ruled over the *quốc* at that time. It is more difficult to determine how to translate the term *quốc* in early twentieth-century texts written by reformist scholars who had been exposed to the Western concept of the nation, as that term was also written as *quốc* by such scholars. However, Đam clearly states in his textbook that “our *quốc* was originally [or, in essence is] (*bản*) a monarchy (*quân chủ chính thể*).” He then explains that this *quốc* had become part of French-controlled Indochina. Although Đam did not make it clear what the Southern *quốc* was under colonial rule, I would argue that the fact that he saw it essentially as a monarchy justifies using the term “kingdom” as a translation of *quốc* in his text as well (Lương Trúc Đàm (1908, 2a).
- 3 Lương Trúc Đàm (1908, 1a–b).
- 4 Lương Trúc Đàm (1908, 2a–b).
- 5 For more on anomaly accounts, see Company (1996).
- 6 For more on this, see my discussion in Kelley (2012).
- 7 *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* [Complete book of the historical records of Đại Việt] (hereafter ĐVSKTT [1479] 1697, 1b–2a).
- 8 *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện* [Arrayed tales of selected oddities from South of the Passes] (hereafter LNCQLT 1492, 1/12b); ĐVSKTT ([1479] 1697, “Ngoại ký” [Outer annals], 1/1b).

- 9 LNCQLT (1492, 1/13a–b).
- 10 ĐVSKTT ([1479] 1697, 1/2a).
- 11 LNCQLT (1492, 1/14b–15b [quote on 1/15b]) and ĐVSKTT ([1479] 1697, 1/2a–3a [quote on 1/3a]).
- 12 Fan ([5th century C.E.] 2007, 116/7a–b [quote on 116/7b]). The LNCQLT (1/31b–32a) has a slightly altered version of this quote; the ĐVSKTT does not, but does record that Zhou dynasty officials were surprised to find that these people had arrived to present tribute without having been asked to do so (LNCQLT 1492, 1/31b–32a [quote on 1/32a]); ĐVSKTT ([1479] 1697, 1/4a).
- 13 For more evidence of the acceptance by premodern Vietnamese literati of the unequal relationship with the North, see Kelley (2003, 63–76; 2005).
- 14 ĐVSKTT ([1479] 1697, 1/2b).
- 15 Ngô Thì Sĩ (1800, 1/3a).
- 16 Ngô Thì Sĩ (1800, 1/3b).
- 17 Ngô Thì Sĩ (1800, 1/9a).
- 18 For a recent discussion of Zhao Tuo’s place in the early history of this region, see Brindley (2015, 195–208).
- 19 ĐVSKTT ([1479] 1697, 2/8a).
- 20 ĐVSKTT ([1479] 1697, 3/12a).
- 21 These seven commanderies were Nam Hải/Nanhai, Uất Lâm/Yulin, Thương Ngô/Cangwu, Giao Chi/Jiaozhi, Cửu Chân/Jiuzhen, Nhật Nam/Rinan, and Hợp Phố/Hepu.
- 22 This was the Chinese administrator Ren Yan, who served in the region in the first century C.E. He reportedly taught people proper marriage rites, and, in later centuries, Vietnamese literati praised him for having done so. For more on Ren Yan, see Taylor (1983, 34–36).
- 23 The Zhu and Si Rivers are in Shandong Province, the birthplace of Confucius. Hence, their “remnant waves” (i.e., all that can reach so far to the south) are used here as a metaphor for his teachings.
- 24 Lý Tế Xuyên ([14th century] 1992, 171). This is an early nineteenth-century edition of a fourteenth-century work that contains appraisals by an anonymous scholar. The above passage comes from one such appraisal.
- 25 Phạm Đình Hồ (early 19th century, 1/26a).
- 26 Phan Huy Chú (1821, A. 50, 7).
- 27 ĐVSKTT ([1479] 1697, “Bản kỷ” [Primary annals], 3/9b).
- 28 For more on this, see Lại Văn Hưng (2005) and Nguyễn Thị Oanh (2002).
- 29 Phan Huy Chú (1821, 33). “Mountains and rivers” is used here in both a literal and metaphoric sense. Metaphorically, “mountains and rivers” can stand for the territory of a given kingdom as a whole.
- 30 This is what Phan Huy Chú suggests at one point in his *Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí* (1821, 8).
- 31 See, for instance, *Việt Nam dư địa chí* (n.d., 1a–b).
- 32 Lê Quang Định (1806, 1/1a–b).
- 33 See Trần Quang Đức (2013, 275–277) and Woodside (1971).
- 34 ĐVSKTT ([1479] 1697, “Ngoại kỷ,” 5/16a).
- 35 *Địa lý tiệp lãm* (n.d., 7b).

- 36 For more on this, see LNCQLT (1492, 2/21a–22a).
- 37 Hoài Châu Thị (1818, 4b–5a). This work was reportedly compiled by a northerner/Chinese who journeyed to the South/Vietnam in the early nineteenth century.
- 38 Indeed, some Vietnamese texts depict Gao Pian like the legendary ruler Bao Xi, who discovered the patterns (*văn*) of the natural world—that is, “Looking up he sought out the patterns of the heavens, looking down he examined the principles of the land.” See *Cao Biền di cáo* (n.d., 6a) and *Địa lý tiên lam* (n.d., 1b).
- 39 The first work is supposed to be the product of the twenty years that Gao Pian spent studying the landscape of the region. See Cao Biền (n.d., 1a). The *Cao Biền di cáo* [Gao Pian’s posthumous writing] can be found in *Thiên hạ bản đồ mục lục* (n.d.).
- 40 This text begins with a passage in which an unidentified Chinese emperor states that he has heard that many exemplary individuals and talented scholars are born in An Nam. He is aware that Gao Pian and Huang Fu had earlier erected many shrines and temples there and had done much to clear obstacles and open up roads and waterways. He then orders a certain Huang Xun and five other men to proceed to An Nam, where they spend the next twenty-eight years studying the geomantic principles of its landscape. See *An Nam địa cáo lục* (n.d., 1a).
- 41 Hòa Chính (n.d., 1a–2a).
- 42 Hoài Châu Thị (1818, 16b–17a).
- 43 Bửu Cầm et al. (1962, 66). For more on this collection of maps, see Whitmore (1994, 490).
- 44 Phạm Phục Trai (1853, 2/26a).
- 45 Lý Tùng Hiếu (2005, 139–141).
- 46 For more on this, see Trần Thị Phương Hoa (2013).
- 47 Lương Trúc Đàm (1908, 5a).
- 48 Lương Trúc Đàm (1908, 5b).
- 49 Lương Trúc Đàm (1908, 5b–6a).
- 50 Lương Trúc Đàm (1908, 2b).
- 51 Lương Trúc Đàm (1908, 30a).
- 52 *Nam Phong Tạp Chí* (2009, xxxiii, xxxvii).

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